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ABSTRACT

To be indispensable, any professional who works within the school environment must have expertise that others do not have. In the case of psychologists in schools, they must be able to uncover, use, and communicate essential and necessary information about students which facilitates academic and personal growth either directly or indirectly and that cannot be obtained from others in the school system. Their knowledge base as well as interpersonal skills must be unique in that setting. A few major areas in which psychologists can demonstrate their uniqueness are: (1) assessment of intelligence or cognitive abilities, especially when translated into meaningful educational recommendations; (2) assessment of personality or social-emotional functioning that provides teachers and school staff with additional insight into the relationships between the child's behavior and emotional issues; and (3) facilitating a psychologically oriented educational atmosphere that has a scientific perspective when dealing with children's educational problems. However, psychologists in the schools must do more than just assess, because assessment is only the first step in solving the problems faced by children who are experiencing educational failure. (JBJ)

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Chapter Twenty-One

Expertise Makes Psychology in the Schools Indispensable

Jack A. Naglieri

What makes psychologists and psychology indispensable in the schools? Skills that they have which others do not. To be indispensable, any professional who works within the school environment must have expertise that others do not have. In the case of psychologists in the schools, they must be able to uncover, use, and communicate essential and necessary information about students which facilitates academic and personal growth either directly or indirectly and that can not be obtained from others in the school system. Their base of knowledge as well as interpersonal skills must be unique in that setting. What follows are a few major areas in which psychologists can demonstrate their uniqueness. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to present my view of some of the most salient dimensions.

Assessment of Intelligence or Cognitive Abilities

Psychologists, unlike any other educational personnel, have considerable training and expertise in psychometrically sound methods for evaluation of children's intelligence or cognitive abilities. This includes both administration and interpretation of IQ and other ability tests as well as examination of their relation to measures of, for example, motor skills, perception, achievement, and so forth. Of special importance, is the psychologist's knowledge of the relationships between these variables and the child's academic performance both in the class and on measures of achievement.

Psychologists are also uniquely qualified to relate this information to diagnostic decisions to ensure appropriate instruction (e.g., mental retardation, learning disabilities, giftedness, attention deficit disorder). The psychologist's knowledge and skill of differential diagnosis makes a unique contribution in the educational setting. They also apply their knowledge and skills when evaluating the effects of, for example, traumatic brain injury, poor school history, emotional status, and family instability on a child.

The information psychologists obtain from intelligence or cognitive tests along with other sources of data (achievement test results, classroom performance, group tests, etc.) becomes even more useful when the results are translated into meaningful educational recommendations. This requires the knowledge and integration of intelligence test results and effective interventions in a manner that will assist the teacher in making instructional modifications that are consistent with the cognitive and academic needs of the child.

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Assessment of Personality or Social-Emotional Functioning

Psychologists are uniquely qualified to evaluate and provide information about the psychological aspects of a student and to address their mental health needs either directly or indirectly (for example, consultation with teachers or referral to other professionals). Psychologists provide this service through the assessment of psychological or social-emotional functioning to determine when a serious emotional disturbance (using the federal definition) or mental disorder (using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV,* for example) is present.

This knowledge makes a unique contribution in the educational setting especially because it provides teachers and school staff with additional insight into the relationships between the child's behavior and emotional issues. In addition to differential diagnosis and identification of serious emotional disturbance, psychologists make important contributions in evaluation of the effectiveness of treatments applied to address these issues.

Science, Psychology, and Education

Psychologists are uniquely qualified to facilitate a psychologically oriented educational atmosphere (Anderson et al., 1995) that has a scientific perspective when dealing with children's educational problems. While this may involve many dimensions of the child (cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sociological, academic, etc.), it also includes the psychologist's use of their consultation skills to assist the teacher's utilization of skills needed to successfully perform the complex task of teaching. A scientific, data-driven approach to selection of appropriate educational or psychological interventions is provided by psychologists as is a careful and impartial evaluation of the effectiveness of educational interventions.

In order to achieve the goal of facilitating effective learning environments, the psychologist brings a thorough scientific knowledge of the cognitive characteristics of children (e.g., Das, Naglieri, & Kirby, 1994), psychological and emotional dimensions and treatments, educational environments (e.g., De Corte, 1995), and educational techniques (e.g., Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995) that can be relevant. The scientific perspective gives the psychologist a unique view of educational problems and solutions. When combined with rigorous methods of evaluating students and changes in their performance, this perspective is needed and valuable to ensure appropriate and effective education of children.

Postscript

Fagan and Wise (1994) state that if our role in the schools does not involve "traditional assessment or any psychological services," then the need for these professionals will be dramatically reduced. I agree with this perspective because assessment of intellectual and psychological status is an area of expertise that is unique. Moreover, I strongly argue that psychologists in the schools must do more than just assess, because assessment is only the first step in solving the problems faced by children who are experiencing educational failure. The role of the psychologist in the school must be varied but at the same time offer the unique knowledge and skills which I have discussed here. As the profession continues to evolve to meet changes in the educational system, psychologists will be well advised to carefully consider their unique contributions in contrast to those that could also be made by other professionals.

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